

# SPECIAL REPORT

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## Built for Trust, Not for Conflict: ASEAN Faces the Future

By *Drew Thompson and Byron Chong*



The ASEAN logo seen at the association's Business and Investment Summit (ABIS) in Nonthaburi, Thailand, on November 2, 2019. (Photo by Aijaz Rahi/AP)

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## Summary

- ASEAN was designed as a trust-building mechanism for its members rather than as a platform for mediating disputes.
- Historically, ASEAN has been able to minimize interstate conflict because of an adherence to the principles of consensus, non-interference, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. Its many meetings and informal social gatherings build interpersonal trust, enabling many disputes to be settled without resort to formal legal mechanisms.
- This emphasis, however, prevents it from effectively intervening in intrastate conflicts considered domestic issues. Nor is it equipped to handle interstate disagreements that cannot be solved on the sidelines of meetings.
- Pressure on ASEAN to reform its structure and culture comes from the changing security dynamic and the influence of external actors in the region, particularly China and the United States.
- One of the most pressing issues for consideration is the continued relevance and feasibility of ASEAN's principle of consensus-based decision making in light of the emerging challenges presented by increasing US-China competition.



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**MEDIATION,  
NEGOTIATION  
& DIALOGUE**

## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines the evolving role that ASEAN has played in maintaining peace and stability in Southeast Asia. It is the outcome of a joint collaboration between the Centre on Asia and Globalisation at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, and the United States Institute of Peace.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Drew Thompson is a visiting senior research fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. He was formerly the director for China, Taiwan, and Mongolia at the US Department of Defense from 2011 to 2018. Byron Chong is a research associate at the Centre on Asia and Globalisation at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.

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### United States Institute of Peace

2301 Constitution Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20037

Phone: 202.457.1700

Fax: 202.429.6063

E-mail: [usip\\_requests@usip.org](mailto:usip_requests@usip.org)

Web: [www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)

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Residents survey the destruction in Marawi, in the southern Philippines, on April 8, 2018. The city endured extensive damage during five months of battle in 2017 between Islamic State loyalists and the Philippine military. (Photo by Jes Aznar/New York Times)

## Introduction

In the fifty-three years since the founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967, relations among its ten member states have remained generally peaceful, and major interstate conflict has been all but eliminated. Although territorial disputes and other disagreements remain a feature of interstate relations, tensions and differences have been successfully managed, even where entrenched disputes have not been fully resolved. As a result, interstate relations within ASEAN have remained cordial and friendly. Yet intrastate unrest has continued to ravage several parts of the region, taking the form of both armed insurgencies against national governments and between-group violence motivated by ethnic and religious differences. Additionally, ASEAN now faces an external challenge from competition between the United States and China, whose presence in the region threatens to draw individual ASEAN countries into taking sides, despite their desire to balance relations and gain benefits from both powers. Increasing domestic pressures, coupled with the growing influence of extra-regional powers, have weakened solidarity among members and diluted their commitment to the ASEAN community.

At this crossroads in its development, it is worthwhile reflecting on the drivers that brought the association into existence and their contemporary relevance. ASEAN was designed first and foremost as a trust-building mechanism and was never intended to have a role in conflict resolution. ASEAN diplomats have often credited the group's shared principles, norms, and

unique mode of conducting interstate interactions, known as “the ASEAN Way,” for tempering the behavior of its member states and enabling the organization to achieve stability in Southeast Asia. Yet emerging challenges in the region shed light on the deficiencies of consensus-based decision making and the association’s rejection of a visible, direct role in resolving disputes or addressing security challenges within its members’ borders. To build resilience among member states and reinforce its own centrality as a peace-preserving entity in the region, ASEAN must adapt both its culture and its structure. In particular, it must advance beyond its traditional role as a stabilizing mechanism aligned on the foundational principles of noninterference in members’ affairs that seeks merely to minimize rather than resolve conflict, and instead adopt a genuine dispute-resolving and security-enhancing mechanism. This would require a significant reconceptualization of the association’s role and, quite likely, a reconfiguration of its structure.

In reviewing ASEAN’s role and function, the national governments have the advantage of half a century’s experience with the articles of the association’s founding documents and know which have worked well. From this experience they are well positioned to develop a stronger platform for advancing the region’s and the member countries’ economic and security interests in an increasingly fraught geopolitical environment.

## Historical Background

When ASEAN was established in 1967, its founding members—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand—faced a number of existential threats from both internal and external sources. The Vietnam War was at its height and threatening to spill over into neighboring states. Underlying social, ethnic, and religious tensions were fueling rebellions and separatist movements in the territories of four of the five founding members. There were also a number of simmering disputes and disagreements between members, some a legacy of the colonial era, that posed the risk of escalating into stand-alone conflicts. In 1966, only a year before ASEAN’s founding, Indonesia’s policy of aggression against Malaysia and Singapore had ended with the overthrow of President Sukarno. To prevent Indonesia from reverting to a policy of belligerent confrontation, the ASEAN framework was established under Indonesia’s ostensible leadership; at the same time, the framework provided a mechanism for the five founding members to diplomatically bind themselves to one another. Even as they sought to advance regional stability, the national leaders in each state were faced with the task of building their own countries, as all the members except Thailand were young states that had only recently gained their independence.

Faced with these challenges, the members recognized that engaging in conflict among themselves would potentially be catastrophic, weakening their ability to manage their own internal problems and counter communist subversion at the same time. In such a scenario, interstate conflict would undermine both state and regime survivability. Bilateral disputes were therefore deliberately downplayed or set aside as members focused on stabilizing their own domestic fronts. Led by authoritarian or strongman regimes, the five ASEAN members came to rely on and appreciate the value of noninterference, which enabled them to deal with their own domestic

A Thai man walks through a bomb crater in Sisaket, Thailand, near the border with Cambodia on February 7, 2011, after Cambodian and Thai troops clashed near the Preah Vihear Temple, a UNESCO World Heritage Site on the Cambodian side of the border. (Photo by AP)

disturbances without having to worry about consequences from their neighbors.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the policy of noninterference served to counter the spread of communism and prevent the conflict in Indochina from spilling into neighboring states.

Southeast Asian countries were also concerned about the shifting policies and presence of the great powers. China and the Soviet Union were engaged in a competition for regional influence following their split. The withdrawal of the United States from Vietnam and of British military forces from “east of Suez” in the 1970s removed an important deterrent to external threats.<sup>2</sup> Signs of warming in the US-Soviet and US-China relationships further prompted concerns that ASEAN members’ interests could be undermined in great power dealmaking. Not wanting to be at the mercy of other major powers, ASEAN members championed the importance of regional autonomy. To achieve this, it was vital for the members to present a united front.<sup>3</sup> Asserting their position as a single bloc would enhance their bargaining power and better safeguard their collective interests. In 1971, ASEAN adopted the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality declaration, which declared its intent to keep Southeast Asia “free from any form or manner of interference by outside Powers.”<sup>4</sup> This combination of self-restraint in interstate disputes and a policy of noninterference in intrastate disturbances helped contain conflict during the early decades of ASEAN and prevent the conflicts that did arise from escalating and internationalizing.

More recently, however, new technologies and norms have begun to challenge this method of maintaining regional stability through conflict prevention and management. An increasingly global focus on human rights, as well as on other liberal values such as democracy and freedom of speech, coupled with technologies enabling the rapid diffusion of information, has made it increasingly difficult for governments to employ or condone the use of repressive measures domestically without facing public backlash. Though ASEAN states are not all liberal democracies, key states such as Indonesia have transitioned from outright dictatorships at the time the association was founded to more democratically representative governments today. This places greater pressure on members to publicly voice concerns over human rights abuses and participate in risk mitigation efforts. Conflict and conflict management in Southeast Asia have thus developed an



FIGURE 1.

## Map of ASEAN Member States



**ASEAN was founded in 1967  
as a five-nation group:**

- Indonesia
- Malaysia
- The Philippines
- Singapore
- Thailand

**From the mid-1980s to the end of the 1990s,  
the association expanded to include:**

- Brunei (1984)
- Vietnam (1995)
- Laos (1997)
- Myanmar (1997)
- Cambodia (1999)

Names and boundaries (which are approximate) shown on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance on the part of the United States Institute of Peace. (Adapted from artwork by Peter Hermes Furian/Shutterstock.)

increasingly international face.<sup>5</sup> ASEAN as an institution, however, has struggled to keep up with evolving norms and expectations, hewing still to its traditional principles and purposes.

The expansion of ASEAN with the addition of Brunei in 1984 and Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia in the 1990s created a new political and security dynamic for the bloc. The inclusion of countries with even more closed and repressive political systems and without a free press or a healthy civil society further undermined ASEAN's ability to address new expectations in the post–Cold War era. More significant, a string of intra- and interstate conflicts, many of which had long predated ASEAN's founding, were now ensconced within ASEAN itself. These conflicts included bilateral disputes, such as the Thailand-Cambodia dispute over the Preah Vihear Temple and the Vietnam-Cambodia border dispute; intrastate conflicts, such as separatist movements in Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines; the forced displacement of the Rohingya people (which has evolved from an intrastate to an interstate issue); and the long-lasting effects of numerous foreign interventions in Cambodia's civil war. Notably, intrastate conflicts in Thailand, Myanmar, and the Philippines have resulted in more casualties among civilian populations than interstate conflicts, reflecting ASEAN's success in managing and moderating conflict between its members. The underlying causes for this can be traced back to the principles and norms governing interstate interactions within the association.

## Understanding ASEAN

ASEAN countries are diverse in size, culture, language, historical experiences, and ethnic composition. In the absence of a shared cultural and political heritage that could form the basis for regionalism, ASEAN instead adopted a set of principles and norms to form the “ground rules of inter-state relations within the ASEAN community.”<sup>6</sup> The emergence of these norms was less the result of deliberate design than a pragmatic response to the predominant political and security environment at the time. Issues pertaining to sovereignty, autonomy, and regime survival were deemed the most pressing, and subsequently translated into accepted norms for state behavior, including peaceful means for settling disputes, noninterference in domestic affairs, and regional autonomy.

This process of managing interstate interactions came to be known as the ASEAN Way. The term remains a loose concept that has never been properly defined but is universally accepted among ASEAN members. According to Singapore's former foreign minister S. Jayakumar, “The ASEAN Way stresses informality, organization minimalism, inclusiveness, intensive consultations leading to consensus and peaceful resolution of disputes.”<sup>7</sup> The preference for informality and organizational minimalism was meant to make the group flexible and welcoming of the diverse cultural backgrounds and national interests of its members. These penchants also favored the authoritarian regimes and strongman governments that dominated ASEAN membership at its founding. Organizational minimalism assured members that their sovereignty would not be challenged by the group, and is reflected in the ASEAN Secretariat, which is relatively small, modestly funded, and not empowered to impose its will on any member. Avoiding rigid rules of procedure and formal binding agreements further assured members, conveying the implication



ASEAN leaders and their counterparts from China, Japan, and South Korea convened a special online summit in mid-April 2020 to discuss a regional response to the coronavirus pandemic. (Photo by Hau Dinh/AP)

that they were part of the ASEAN family and could trust one another. Close interpersonal contacts became an important channel of communication that facilitated discussions and negotiations.<sup>8</sup> Traditionally, ASEAN discussions take place in informal, sometimes ad hoc settings, making it easier for representatives to engage in frank dialogue and allowing ASEAN officials to get to know

one another quickly. ASEAN relationship managers may joke about golf and karaoke sessions but are quick to note that these informal gatherings are where important work gets done.

Another distinctive element of the ASEAN Way is the practice of consultation, leading to decision making through consensus. All members of the group are consulted in discreet, informal discussions before a consensus is reached. This process gives all members, big and small, a seat at the decision-making table and ensures that no one member's interests are disregarded. While debate and disagreements are unavoidable, ideally they take place behind closed doors, in a nonhostile atmosphere. Only the final consensus decision is made public, reflecting a united front. Lingering disagreements, if any, are publicly downplayed, and embarrassment of fellow ASEAN members is avoided.

This approach of creating a genial environment for discussion has led ASEAN to avoid placing contentious or sensitive issues on its multilateral agenda, exposing the organization to criticism of its relevance and effectiveness. From the organization's perspective, avoiding an issue in public is a way to buy time for the parties involved to find a mutually agreeable solution. Moreover, behind closed doors, the group has been known to use peer pressure to encourage member states to conduct themselves with restraint and moderation. In other cases, issues might be avoided as too complex to deal with at the multilateral level. These issues have more often been left to the respective parties to sort out among themselves, without the benefit of ASEAN mechanisms.<sup>9</sup>

While the ASEAN Way is now synonymous with the group, it has not always been adhered to in practice. In multiple instances, ASEAN countries have not consulted each other in their decision- and policymaking processes, such as when the Philippines filed an arbitration case challenging China's maritime claims in the South China Sea in 2013.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, consensus has not always been achieved when the diverging interests of members could not be reconciled. The ASEAN Way may have been crucial during the early years, when the association's members lacked strong bureaucracies and governance at home and group coherence rested on



the shared fear of domestic instability and external interference. But this instability has gradually retreated as an issue as the nature of the constituent regimes and the challenges they face have become more complex. Previous preferences for informal engagement on the margins of ASEAN meetings have also been gradually replaced by an institutionalized framework of regular summits and official meetings, prompting one former official to observe that the opportunity to build personal relationships and problem solve through informal meetings was being lost.

## **STRUCTURE OF THE ORGANIZATION**

ASEAN has remained a loose formation of states without a central governing authority. Almost all important matters pertaining to the organization are discussed and decided upon collectively by representatives of the member states through dialogue and consensus. This has necessitated the institutionalization of a framework of regular meetings to be held between ASEAN officials. For example, decisions at the highest level are made by the ASEAN heads of state when they meet during the annual ASEAN Summit, while intraregional cooperation in specific sectors may be discussed by the relevant ministers in charge during regular ASEAN ministers meetings.<sup>11</sup> In all, more than one thousand ASEAN meetings take place every year, involving heads of state, ministers, and senior officials, covering almost every aspect of intra-ASEAN cooperation, including finance, health, education, labor, and the environment.<sup>12</sup>

Besides serving as a platform for discussion and consultation, this framework of regular meetings also performs an important function—to build personal relationships between respective leaders and bureaucracies of the member countries. Relationship building progresses from the heads of state down to counterparts at functional working levels. Relationships and familiarity between counterparts, at both personal and organizational levels, are a primary benefit to the members.

The ASEAN Secretariat is responsible for implementing the decisions made during these meetings. Its role is primarily administrative and limited to economic and technical issues.<sup>13</sup> It has no decision-making authority and is staffed by only around three hundred people—a relatively small bureaucracy.<sup>14</sup> Hence, rather than a supranational decision-making authority, the secretariat is a subordinate body, responsible for carrying out the mandates of the member states. By design, the secretariat lacks the ability to compel and is prevented from becoming powerful enough to infringe on the sovereignty of member states. This is a key reason why ASEAN as an organization is unable to resolve intra-ASEAN conflicts—it is purposefully designed to be unable to impose outcomes on its members.

## **LEGAL INSTRUMENTS FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT**

Despite ASEAN's traditional preference for ad hoc dispute management mechanisms, its membership expansion necessitated the adoption of more formal rules and legal instruments. Before this expansion, parties to a dispute could request the formation of a High Council, which would conduct mediation and make recommendations. This was provided for under the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation adopted in 1976.<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, more well-defined rules and processes were adopted under the 2007 ASEAN Charter and the 2010 Protocol to the ASEAN Charter on Dispute Settlement Mechanisms. The 2010 Protocol provided parties with the option of referring their dispute to the ASEAN chair or secretary-general, and even utilizing arbitration as a form of settlement.<sup>16</sup>

As long as [ASEAN] remains a nonbinding, consensus-driven organization with no enforcement processes, member states retain the freedom to pursue resolution strategies outside the group, without concern for censure by ASEAN.

These instruments have major limitations that ultimately weaken their effectiveness, however. First, the mechanisms rely on voluntary compliance. All three mechanisms require the agreement of all parties to proceed, making it impossible to compel a single member. One party can unilaterally block the entire process by simply withholding consent. Second, decision making is based on consensus. All decisions are made collectively by representatives from all ASEAN mem-

ber states, including parties to the dispute, making it unlikely that a definitive solution can be reached so long as parties are in continuing disagreement. The third limitation, weak enforcement, is closely related to the first two. ASEAN lacks a strong governing authority to enforce decisions. Bodies like the High Council only make recommendations; they have no power to force compliance.<sup>17</sup> Even the ASEAN Summit, at which the highest-level decisions are made, does not provide a venue for handling such disputes and is not designed to function as an international court or tribunal.

These limitations have greatly hindered past attempts at resolving regional disputes, leading members to look to non-ASEAN international mechanisms for support. In 1998, the Ligitan and Sipadan islands dispute was referred to the International Court of Justice, after Indonesia's move to convene the High Council was blocked by Malaysia.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Cambodia invoked the ASEAN charter in August 2010, requesting Vietnam, as the ASEAN chair, to mediate the Preah Vihear dispute, but Thailand's refusal halted the process.<sup>19</sup> The Cambodian government bypassed ASEAN and twice approached the UN Security Council directly, in July 2008 and February 2011, to mediate the dispute, demonstrating the lack of confidence it had in ASEAN dispute resolution mechanisms.<sup>20</sup>

ASEAN's limitations are a deliberate choice by the members, reflecting their sensitivities over sovereignty and noninterference. As long as it remains a nonbinding, consensus-driven organization with no enforcement processes, member states retain the freedom to pursue resolution strategies outside the group, without concern for censure by ASEAN. Ultimately, for ASEAN to be relevant and successful as a dispute settlement or conflict management mechanism—with success measured by its members deciding to seek resolution within the organization—significant reforms would be needed.

## PERSONALITIES AND DOMESTIC POLITICS

Although ASEAN's organizational structure has predominately been state-centric, individual personalities can play a decisive role in either resolving or aggravating disputes. Ambassador Marty Natalegawa, who was Indonesia's foreign minister during the Preah Vihear crisis between Thailand and Cambodia, is probably the most notable example of this. In early 2011, Vietnam passed the ASEAN chairmanship to Indonesia. Just a few months earlier, Vietnam's attempt to mediate the dispute had gone nowhere as a result of Thailand withholding consent. Unlike its predecessor, Indonesia took an unconventional approach: Ambassador Natalegawa acted on behalf of his government rather than wait for ASEAN to address the crisis. This allowed him to shuttle between Phnom Penh and Bangkok to conduct a dialogue with both governments, urging restraint and calling for calm, without worrying about ASEAN bureaucratic protocols.<sup>21</sup> Natalegawa's persistence succeeded in bringing both sides to the negotiating table and led to a temporary halt to border

clashes.<sup>22</sup> Although talks later broke down, Natalegawa had been instrumental in restarting bilateral talks, which had stalled, and in preventing the conflict from escalating. This is a perhaps a singular example of a third-country member of ASEAN acting as an intermediary to defuse conflict and secure peace. Notably, had Natalegawa acted on behalf of ASEAN, Indonesia would have found itself in the same situation as Vietnam when it was chair: entangled in ASEAN rules and procedures requiring consensus. Natalegawa's efforts demonstrate the importance of having the right individual associated with the right country overseeing the crisis management process.

Individual leaders can also seriously undermine ASEAN cohesion when they pursue their own political interests at the expense of the association. Cambodia's leader Hun Sen, who was previously stridently anti-China in his outlook, has become an increasingly close ally of Beijing. Not only has Hun Sen's regime benefited in the form of aid and investment from China, ties to China have also allowed Hun Sen to counter accusations of being a Vietnamese puppet, a death knell in Cambodian politics. Moreover, Beijing, unlike the West, has raised no concerns about Phnom Penh's state of democracy and human rights record.<sup>23</sup> Hun Sen's strategic calculus led to a schism in ASEAN, which materialized during a meeting in Phnom Penh in 2012 during Cambodia's ASEAN chairmanship. Cambodia sided with Beijing instead of its fellow ASEAN members and blocked a joint statement that would have addressed China's assertiveness in the South China Sea.<sup>24</sup> This was the first time in ASEAN's forty-five-year history that it failed to issue a joint statement at a heads-of-state summit. ASEAN managers informally refer to it as the "2012 Cambodian incident." The outcome raised questions over ASEAN's ability to stand united against pressure from China. More important, the ability of a single member state—led by an authoritarian leader—to block the majority decision for its own interests at the expense of members highlights an underlying problem in the group's consensus-led approach to decision making.

Domestic politics are another important factor influencing intra- and inter-ASEAN member conflict and the ability of ASEAN as a body to address it. While ASEAN values and interdependent political relationships might reduce the risk of misunderstanding and escalation, competing interests and incentives linked to domestic politics exacerbate tensions. In particular, historical disputes have been used for domestic political gain in some inter-ASEAN conflicts. The bilateral relationship between Singapore and Malaysia, for instance, has been deeply influenced by personalities as well as domestic politics. Malaysia's twice-serving prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, has had a huge influence over bilateral ties during both his terms. Known to be a fierce fighter for Malay rights, he has shown a strong personal dislike for both Singapore (which is predominantly ethnic Chinese) and its founding prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew.<sup>25</sup> Mahathir's first term, from 1981 to 2003, was a period of strained bilateral relations marked by multiple contentious disputes with Singapore. The situation improved after he stepped down in 2003. His successors, Abdullah Badawi and Najib Razak, focused more on cooperation with Singapore, and most disputes were either resolved or set aside during their tenure.<sup>26</sup> Mahathir's brief return to power from 2018 to 2020 reignited tensions with Singapore, with renewed disagreements most visibly those over territorial limits and water rights.<sup>27</sup>

Domestic politics have also played a major role in aggravating Cambodia's ties with its neighbors. Hun Sen used the dispute with Thailand over Preah Vihear as an opportunity to bolster his image by stirring up nationalist sentiments with anti-Thai rhetoric. Fighting at the border was amplified in Cambodian media and political messaging to distract attention from other problems

Cambodia faced, such as unemployment and corruption. Throughout the crisis, Hun Sen kept hostility with Bangkok at a level just short of all-out war as a way of continually inciting the public and bolstering his own popularity.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, Thai nationalists seized on the crisis to advocate for an aggressive stance, further their narrative of national humiliation, and direct attention to Thailand's irredentist claims to territory lost to French Indochina in the nineteenth century.<sup>29</sup>

Cambodia's relations with Vietnam have also suffered for the sake of political expediency. Hun Sen's political opponents often emphasize that he was installed by the Vietnamese government, and accuse him of being Hanoi's puppet. Opposition parties play up the "Vietnam threat" and encourage anti-Vietnamese nationalism as a means of gaining popularity.<sup>30</sup> The long-running border dispute between Cambodia and Vietnam has also been an issue of contention, with violent clashes occurring between Cambodian activists and Vietnamese authorities along the boundary. Although the Hun Sen government has traditionally remained silent on such border clashes, its attitude changed dramatically after the 2013 Cambodian elections, when it experienced a steep drop in support. Recognizing the growing anti-Vietnamese climate, Hun Sen began adopting a more aggressive tone toward Vietnam, publicly calling on Cambodia's neighbor to halt its encroachment in disputed areas.<sup>31</sup>

In Cambodia's relations with both Thailand and Vietnam, the political elites have demonstrated their willingness to exploit public sentiment for political gain, even if it means damaging the country's relationships with its neighbors. This is an important factor that limits ASEAN's ability to manage disputes between its members: if one party stands to gain politically from a dispute with another member, there is less incentive to agree to a compromise. ASEAN's hands are tied insofar as it has no authority to compel its members to reach an agreement.

To change this dynamic and allow the organization to succeed as a dispute resolution mechanism, ASEAN leaders would need to prioritize ASEAN and ASEAN community building, but that prospect appears unlikely. Four of ASEAN's founding states—Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines—all now have leaders either intensely focused on domestic affairs by necessity or uninterested in foreign policy generally.

## ASEAN's Role in Intrastate and Interstate Conflict

By design, ASEAN does not play a visible role in resolving intrastate crises and disputes in the region, nor does its modest secretariat have enforcement authority. Instead, respect for members' own sovereignty and adherence to the principle of noninterference make the association extremely reluctant to step in as mediator or to undertake any major interventionalist role. Local conflicts in East Timor and Aceh; ethnic conflict in northern Myanmar, southern Thailand, and the Philippines; and the Rohingya refugee crisis have all been viewed by ASEAN as domestic issues, making them unsuitable candidates for third-party intervention by ASEAN members. Similarly, bilateral disagreements, such as disputes over the Ligitan and Sipadan islands and Pedra Branca, have been ignored by ASEAN, forcing claimants to seek settlement through arbitration in external multilateral institutions such as the International Court of Justice. The territorial dispute between Malaysia and the Philippines over Sabah was similarly declared a bilateral issue, leaving ASEAN an irrelevant bystander.<sup>32</sup> Though ASEAN has

There is broad recognition among ASEAN members that instability in postconflict societies, if left unresolved, could metastasize and affect the rest of the region. Thus, ASEAN has been open to collaborating with extraregional powers . . . on regional humanitarian and peacekeeping missions.

established legal protocols for dispute settlement, the emphasis on member-state sovereignty makes these protocols irrelevant when it comes to managing disputes.

Rather than take a direct, visible role in dispute settlement, ASEAN often applies pressure behind closed doors to influence the behavior of its members. For instance, on the sidelines of the 2000 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Brunei, ASEAN leaders asked the Myanmar representative to provide a “report” on the country’s internal

situation, and in 2006, Myanmar was denied the ASEAN chair it was entitled to as a result of its lack of progress in political reform.<sup>33</sup> This approach has had mixed success, with countries such as Malaysia breaking away from the ASEAN stance of noninterference to publicly criticize Myanmar over its handling of the Rohingya refugee crisis—though with the Rohingya seeking refuge in Malaysia, the crisis has become Malaysia’s domestic issue as well.<sup>34</sup>

ASEAN has also successfully averted interstate disputes by providing opportunities for the representatives from the ten ASEAN countries to socialize and build rapport at ASEAN’s countless meetings and retreats. The close interpersonal contacts ASEAN fosters enable frank discussions of disagreements, creating the potential for mutually acceptable outcomes to be explored privately. For instance, Singapore’s trade disputes with Malaysia in 1995 and with the Philippines in 2003, as well as a dispute over port limits with Malaysia in 2018–19, were all settled amicably without international adjudication.<sup>35</sup> These disputes were resolved behind the scenes between the respective foreign ministers and agents who had come to know and trust one another through many the ASEAN meetings and their associated social gatherings. The lack of publicity surrounding such quiet settlements has been a key factor enabling the peaceful resolution of disputes, though it also contributes to the perception that ASEAN itself is ineffectual.

One area in which ASEAN has played a visible leading role is postconflict recovery. There is broad recognition among ASEAN members that instability in postconflict societies, if left unresolved, could metastasize and affect the rest of the region. Thus, ASEAN has been open to collaborating with extraregional powers, including the United States, Japan, the European Union, and Australia, on regional humanitarian and peacekeeping missions such as the Australia-led International Force East Timor and the EU’s Aceh Monitoring Mission. Indeed, the lack of a central mediating mechanism with enforcement authority in the region has left the door open for external powers to expand their influence in Southeast Asia by providing aid, mediation, arbitration, and peacekeeping expertise. In Myanmar, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management was activated to work with the International Red Cross to provide humanitarian assistance to displaced refugees. Individual ASEAN members, such as Singapore and Indonesia, also contributed much-needed personnel and supplies to this effort on a bilateral basis.<sup>36</sup> In the aftermath of the Cyclone Nargis disaster in Myanmar in May 2008, ASEAN successfully negotiated a tripartite cooperative effort with the Myanmar government and the United Nations to bring humanitarian assistance into the country after Naypyidaw turned down aid offers from Western countries, including the United States and France.<sup>37</sup> In spearheading these multilateral efforts, ASEAN has sought to assert its central role in the region while managing the assistance foreign entities are capable of providing.

# Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting on Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)



Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (fifth from left) poses for a group photo with other leaders before a Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers meeting on the coronavirus pandemic in Vientiane, Laos, on February 20, 2020. (Photo by Sakchai Lalit/AP)

## ASEAN and External Powers

Though ASEAN has placed great emphasis on upholding regional autonomy and minimizing external interference in Southeast Asian matters, member governments are pragmatic in recognizing that external powers will continue to have vested interests and a presence in the region. ASEAN-led multilateralism is therefore pursued as a means of continuing constructive engagement with external powers while maintaining enough authority and sway to dilute the influence of those powers and allow ASEAN to retain a central role. This approach has not been easy or without challenges. The two most consequential external powers are the United States, which is seen by the region as a source of security, and China, which is the leading trading partner of ASEAN members.

### RELATIONS WITH CHINA

Among ASEAN's external relationships, the most challenging has been with China, which dwarfs Southeast Asia in terms of population, economic power, and military strength. Concern over the emergence of a Chinese-led regional order has motivated ASEAN to engage Beijing through multilateral arrangements, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, as a means of enmeshing China within an ASEAN-led regional order. However, as China's political and economic influence in the region has expanded, the country has become increasingly assertive, notably in the South China Sea. As the dominant trading partner of nearly every country

in Southeast Asia, China has applied political pressure and economic coercion, as well as financial inducements, to ASEAN members to pursue Beijing's disputed maritime claims. The 2012 Cambodia incident demonstrated Beijing's ability to manipulate intra-ASEAN relationships and sow discord within the group. Moreover, China's military build-up and the use of "gray zone" coercion—actions below the level that would trigger a military response—in the maritime domain, coupled with political and economic coercion, have effectively deterred countries from directly confronting China over its disputed territorial claims.

## **RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES**

China's coercive behavior in the South China Sea has become a point of tension with the United States, which historically has been Southeast Asia's primary security provider. While ASEAN countries generally see Washington's presence as a check on Beijing's assertiveness, conflict between the two powers would undoubtedly threaten the region's stability and each country's prosperity. Hence, ASEAN has sought to encourage US support for regional initiatives while deepening its own bilateral relations with regional allies and partners. Most important, there is a general view that instead of confrontation and intense competition, amicable cooperation between China and the United States would be the best paradigm for the region. This partly explains the lack of enthusiasm for the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy on the part of ASEAN members. Considered by many to be a reaction to China's rising power, the US administration's response is perceived as a zero-sum dynamic in which gains by one power are considered to be losses for the other, potentially resulting in heightened tensions that could result in collateral harm to Southeast Asian states. Although part of the US strategy aims to preserve the sovereignty of the small Southeast Asian states and ensure continued freedom of navigation in the region, the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy as a whole is seen as excessively antagonistic toward China, creating regional risks that Southeast Asian states do not want to assume.

## **ASEAN'S MULTILATERAL ARRANGEMENTS**

ASEAN has sought to engage other external powers through various regional initiatives launched by the association. Arrangements such as the ASEAN Plus Three group (which includes China, Japan, and South Korea) focus on regional cooperation in the economic, sociopolitical, and security fields. Others, like the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (which includes Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, and the United States) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (which includes Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, China, the EU, India, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, and the United States), focus on deeper security collaboration and dialogue to enhance regional security. These forums serve to enhance ASEAN centrality by enabling member states to have robust bilateral (and multilateral) relations with outside powers even as they provide an ASEAN mechanism to support inclusivity and members' balancing efforts. The rotating chair of ASEAN hosts these meetings and proposes the meeting agendas, which facilitates moving ASEAN priorities and norms to the fore in each cycle.

# Potential Sources of Future Instability and Conflict

ASEAN has made critical and intangible contributions to regional security by encouraging cooperation among its members and promoting the peaceful resolution of disputes. Though long-standing conflicts may simmer quietly, conflict and instability in Southeast Asia are also being generated by nontraditional security challenges such as climate change and natural disasters, disease epidemics, resource competition, and ethnoreligious extremism. Increasing globalization and rapid technological change further magnify the potential security-related impact of many of these challenges. As global competition intensifies between China and the United States, Southeast Asia is also at risk of turning into a theater for their great power rivalry.

Southeast Asia is one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world. Extreme weather events have resulted not only in huge loss of life but also in major socioeconomic consequences as people are displaced and infrastructure and livelihoods are destroyed. Such natural disasters exacerbate conditions of poverty and inequality in the most vulnerable countries, contributing to regional instability. In response, ASEAN leaders have pledged to develop a coordinated regional response to disaster emergencies through the signing of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response in 2008 and the One ASEAN One Response Declaration in 2016. While these agreements enhance intraregional cooperation, the need for capacity building remains a concern. Less-developed members lack the resources needed to prioritize disaster mitigation and are the most vulnerable to the adverse socioeconomic effects of extreme weather events.<sup>38</sup>

Climate change and poor resource management have also reduced the region's food security. Climate change is expected to cause rice yields in the region's major rice exporters of Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam to fall by 50 percent over the course of the twenty-first century. Many fertile low-lying delta regions are expected to be lost to rising sea levels.<sup>39</sup> The food supply is already under intense pressure to provide for the region's growing population even as huge amounts of agricultural products are exported to India and China annually.<sup>40</sup> In 2007–08, a sudden fall in rice yields triggered a global food crisis, resulting in food riots and panic buying in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world. To lower the region's vulnerability to such shocks, ASEAN has established a regional emergency rice reserve, facilitated regional rice trade, and developed a food security information system.<sup>41</sup> In addition, it is leveraging new technologies to produce higher crop yields and stabilize agricultural output during periods of climate uncertainty. However, these initiatives alone will not be sufficient. Investments of \$800 billion over the next decade are needed in order for Asia's food and agricultural industry to grow enough food to feed the region.<sup>42</sup>

Climate change and overfishing have resulted in dwindling fish stocks along the coast of China and in the South China Sea. This situation contributes to increased illegal fishing, not just by individuals from regional littoral states such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines but also by those from extraregional countries such as China.<sup>43</sup> In a region with multiple overlapping maritime





An Indonesian fisherman in the country's Natuna Islands, in the South China Sea, on January 31, 2020.  
(Photo by Adam Dean/New York Times)

claims, the increased tension over access to maritime resources has resulted in several politically charged confrontations at sea, including the ramming of fishing vessels, with the subsequent deployment of military aircraft and coast guard vessels to protect fishing fleets.<sup>44</sup> Since 2002, China and ASEAN have been in talks to develop a code of conduct that, among other things, would manage fishing disputes and prevent hostilities in disputed waters. However, progress has been slow because of disagreements on multiple issues.<sup>45</sup> Confrontations at sea are likely to continue as the Pacific-facing countries take increasingly bold steps to protect their territorial fisheries.

The region has been affected by several infectious disease outbreaks, including SARS, avian influenza, African swine fever, and, most recently, COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus that originated in Wuhan, China. Vector-borne diseases such as Zika virus, dengue fever, and drug-resistant malaria and tuberculosis have also emerged in the region. Southeast Asia is increasingly interconnected with the rest of the world through trade, investment, tourism, and transportation links, which present more avenues for new disease transmission. ASEAN has several collaborative regional arrangements in place to coordinate intraregional information sharing, situation updates, and national disease control activities.<sup>46</sup> In the early months of the COVID-19 outbreak, these established channels enhanced cooperation and ensured the

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swift sharing of information between ASEAN members, including efficacious practices and experiences in preventing, diagnosing, treating, and controlling the disease.<sup>47</sup> Members mutually agreed to maintain trade and economic activity to minimize the economic fallout and ensure the continued flow of food and essential supplies between countries. The group also worked with its ASEAN Plus Three partners to establish a multicurrency swap arrangement to strengthen members' short-term liquidity and facilitate trade.

In addition, ASEAN reached out to external institutions, including the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank, which pledged to increase financing capacity for members.

The emerging fourth industrial revolution—characterized by the blurring of boundaries between and among physical, digital, and biological domains—could potentially affect the region's stability and security, presenting new challenges for ASEAN. Job opportunities in low-value processing and manufacturing industries will decline, while demand for professionals with digital technology skills will grow.<sup>48</sup> Increasing job polarization is expected to undermine social cohesion, particularly in less-developed ASEAN countries that have yet to benefit from the expansion of manufacturing and export-processing industries. ASEAN will be particularly at risk as half the region's population will be within the productive age group of twenty to fifty-four years when these transitions accelerate.<sup>49</sup> Governments will face enormous pressure to create sufficient jobs for people with limited skills or education, all while trying to ensure that their economies benefit from technological advances. ASEAN has adopted initiatives such as the Digital Integration Framework Action Plan and the ASEAN Declaration on Industrial Transformation to Industry 4.0, aimed at preparing the region's workforce, infrastructure, and regulatory frameworks for the digital transformation. However, the huge disparities in digital connectivity and e-commerce, and the barriers to technology-driven human capital flows between ASEAN member states, make any effective intraregional collaborative effort extremely challenging.<sup>50</sup>

The rise of ethnonationalism and the use of religion as a divisive force in politics will threaten stability in the region for the foreseeable future. Across Southeast Asia, various hard-line religious movements have emerged, creating divisions and fault lines in communities. In Myanmar, such hard-line Buddhist organizations as the Ma Ba Tha stoke anti-Muslim sentiments through religious rhetoric. In Indonesia, Islamist groups organized massive demonstrations that contributed to the conviction of former Jakarta governor Basuki "Ahok" Tjahaja Purnama on blasphemy charges, reflecting rising intolerance and religious divisions in Indonesian society. Disturbingly, some mainstream politicians have seized on ethnoreligious rhetoric as a means of playing to public sentiment and increasing their own popularity.<sup>51</sup> This has been observed in the very polarized election results in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Myanmar, where votes were cast mainly along ethnic and religious lines.

The rise of right-wing religious fundamentalism unfortunately creates fertile ground for radicalization. These fundamentalist ideas are gaining traction not just among the poorly educated but also increasingly among the better-off and well-educated middle class. If such sentiments spread widely, they could undermine regional stability. To combat this trend and promote

moderate views among the youth, ASEAN has adopted initiatives that emphasize the sharing of information and best practices among members. The efficacy of such measures, however, is likely to be limited because of ASEAN's traditional reluctance to encroach on member states' domestic interests and because, in some cases, local governments and officials encourage such views for self-benefit.

Finally, the growing rivalry between China and the United States threatens to undermine the stability of Southeast Asia. China's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea and its rejection of existing international rules and norms, coupled with the adversarial approach articulated in the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy, has raised both fear and tension in the region. This rivalry has not yet evolved into proxy conflicts of the sort that characterized the Cold War, but there are concerns that the region could become a theater for their great power competition. In addition, the perception of the United States as a declining power with limited interests in the region, along with their own geographic proximity to a rising China, has led some ASEAN countries to strengthen their defensive capabilities as a means of deterring potential aggression, whether from China or from neighboring states that may be backed by outside powers. The past decade has seen significant increases in defense spending in the region, with ASEAN members acquiring new military hardware and modernizing obsolete weapons.<sup>52</sup> Though current arms procurement efforts remain modest, emerging security dilemmas reflect mutual distrust about the intentions and ambitions of neighboring states, particularly given long-standing conflicts that have remained unresolved.

## Recommendations for Strengthening the Role of ASEAN

ASEAN's most remarkable achievement is bringing together ten vastly different countries, forging a common regional identity, and effectively ending large-scale war and conflict in the region. Yet to retain its relevance, it must continue to seek new avenues for strengthening relationships among its members while remaining attentive to the many lingering disagreements that persist. It must prepare to address emerging threats from, especially, the effects of climate change and rapid technological progress while managing the growing international rivalry between China and the United States, which is expected to test ASEAN's cohesion, and possibly its regional relevance. Should it choose to review and reconfigure its structure and culture, ASEAN will want to hone what has worked well in the past and anticipate future needs in a rapidly evolving geopolitical climate. Several recommendations follow.

**ASEAN should seek to revitalize its strategic ambition and relevance.** Experienced leaders in key ASEAN member states recognize that the group has very limited ability to deal with contentious regional and international issues that disproportionately affect some members, raising the risk that ASEAN will become irrelevant in the future. A certain fatalism and timidity in the association's decision making are increasingly apparent and disturbing to experienced diplomats seeking to enhance ASEAN's effectiveness in protecting the interests of member states.

In particular, disputes with China over South China Sea resources have placed ASEAN states at odds with one other as China pressures some members and incentivizes others to support its goals, in this way hoping to render ASEAN toothless. The specter of China-US competition in economic and security domains places ASEAN members in the midst of another dilemma. Recognizing the threat, ASEAN experts and diplomats have identified two important lessons from member state experiences during the Cold War that should aid today's leaders in better managing great power dynamics in the region.

First, the perception that ASEAN must choose between siding with the United States or with China is false. Just as during the Cold War, individual ASEAN states may tilt toward one or the other power on specific issues, in accordance with specific national interests, but that does not mean they "side" with either power.<sup>53</sup> Second, ASEAN was able to thrive because its members were able to balance their national and regional interests, and were united by the shared belief in the benefits of noninterference in one another's affairs and noninterference by external powers. Today, however, external economic and political influence has created new dynamics and introduced divisions affecting the group's cohesion. It contributed to the 2012 Cambodian incident, which remains one of the most egregious examples of a single member state placing its own interests (and the interests of a nonmember state) ahead of those of the group and is an important data point for advocates within ASEAN capitals arguing for a more robust and ambitious ASEAN. The group's ability to stand its ground and protect its collective interests depends heavily on whether it is able to restore unity and cohesion among members moving forward.

The Cambodian incident raised questions about the continued relevance and feasibility of ASEAN's principle of consensus-based decision making in light of the current regional power dynamic. ASEAN experts, especially retired diplomats heavily invested in a successful ASEAN, have floated the idea of new norms and processes that would allow for a majority-view outcome to prevent a single country beholden to an external power from preventing progress or delaying an outcome indefinitely, while still providing the opportunity for the minority view to be aired and respected. It would be premature to conclude that ASEAN as an organization will someday reject its consensus-based approach in lieu of a majority-rules model, but it is clear that members recognize that the current approach could potentially marginalize Southeast Asian interests and reduce members to the role of a client state of one or another external power. Proponents argue that it is imperative for ASEAN to have the political will and boldness to discuss and pursue new ideas to expand the group's relevance, as well as its ability to maneuver, while robustly rejecting any sense of fatalism and the notion that small states lack agency.

**ASEAN's legal instruments and structure should be reviewed and amended.** ASEAN's legal instruments, particularly the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, the association's charter, and the 2010 Protocol to the ASEAN Charter on Dispute Settlement Mechanisms, have limitations and would benefit from a major review to inform future instruments. While these instruments provide the necessary legal framework for managing disputes, many of their constituent articles constrain rather than facilitate action, to the point that they are essentially ignored by parties seeking a meaningful resolution. Enough time has passed that most member states are cognizant of which articles work and which do not. ASEAN should have the political courage and self-confidence to begin the review process to remove the flaws in these mechanisms, or at least minimize their

effects, and create new instruments that help preserve peace and stability without undermining the sovereignty of individual states. If these problems remain unaddressed, members will continue to seek external mediation from multilateral institutions such as the International Court of Justice and the UN, undermining ASEAN's relevance and centrality.

**ASEAN's expanding bureaucratic structure is a reflection of its growing institutionalization as an organization. The roles and functions of many of its departments and positions, however, bear thoughtful review.** For instance, each member state is represented by an ASEAN director-general, yet the role and function of this position are not well defined, and even seasoned diplomats have admitted to being unclear as to what their actual role is. The Committee of Permanent Representatives is another example of a body whose role is unclear. Despite consisting of ambassador-level representatives to the ASEAN Secretariat, the committee has gained the somewhat dubious reputation of being a repository for ASEAN issues that are inconsequential or no longer relevant. Finally, and most important, the secretariat would benefit from reform and rejuvenation. Although it has been deliberately weakened by the member states to preserve their individual sovereignty, it does not have to be ineffectual. The secretariat would benefit from greater analytical capacity, which requires a corresponding increase in resources directed toward it. This could be the starting point for a more serious discussion and coordination of strategic interests among ASEAN member states as to how the secretariat could play a more meaningful and impactful role.

**Member states should improve domestic understanding and acceptance of ASEAN's role.** While most member-state citizens are aware of the existence of ASEAN, few understand its role and achievements, and there is little identification with ASEAN among domestic populations. This lacuna represents a major failing on the part of both the organization and the national leaders, who infrequently highlight for domestic audiences ASEAN's role in maintaining regional stability. As regional politics become more pluralistic, governments will increasingly need domestic support to pursue new policies and strategies. The economic integration of the member states, for example, will necessitate breaking down trade barriers and exposing protected industries, which in some cases are politically influential, to import competition. Trade liberalization will initially hurt parts of some economies, necessitating an educated, politically literate public able to understand and support new, progressive policies that will benefit the country in the long run. Greater involvement of civil society, academia, and the media in ASEAN politics, a tailored education curriculum, and public information campaigns could be undertaken to raise awareness of the importance of the group and the benefits it brings to each state in the region.

**ASEAN should expand the role of think tanks and academic research centers.** While there is no lack of scholars and analysts with expertise on Southeast Asia, few play a role in advising or providing consultation to government officials, which hurts policymaking and imposes an opportunity cost on conservative bureaucracies. Empowered think tank organizations and academic research centers could put forward innovative ideas and policy solutions that may not come readily to mind for officials, or they could support progressive officials seeking external validation for reforms. Greater involvement of civil society through think tanks in policymaking processes would also increase public support for the group and embolden member states to more carefully balance collective interests with parochial ones. A greater systemic problem is a

weak civil society in some states, coupled with the lack of a regional culture of integrating track 1 and 2 dialogues, or of fostering independent think tanks and research centers that could contribute innovative policy recommendations.

**ASEAN should expand the role of civil society organizations.** ASEAN has traditionally been a top-down, elite-driven institution. But as norms evolve, ASEAN must adapt so that it does not become disconnected from the needs of its member states' populations. Greater involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs) can prevent such a disconnect and ensure the association is relevant to its members' respective publics. Engagement allows grassroots sentiment to be heard and demonstrates to people in the region that they are well represented. Despite ASEAN's "people-centered" agenda, however, the participation of CSOs currently is limited. (For example, the interface meeting CSOs held with ASEAN foreign ministers in November 2019 was the first such meeting in five years.) ASEAN's reluctance to involve CSOs is understandable, since the issue of human rights abuses and other uncomfortable topics are almost certain to be raised. ASEAN lacks the mandate to act on these concerns, whether they are extrajudicial killings in the Philippines or the mistreatment of the Rohingya in Myanmar; such matters are considered to be within the domestic purview of the relevant members. For engagement to be productive, CSOs should manage their expectations and be mindful of ASEAN's norms and limitations if they hope to contribute in meaningful ways to the institution.

**Member states should improve information sharing on intrastate conflicts.** Intrastate conflicts in ASEAN states have resulted in many more deaths than interstate conflicts and, in most cases, have lasted longer. ASEAN countries lack an information-sharing forum or platform through which ASEAN countries could compare lessons learned from their experiences dealing with antigovernment insurgency and ethnic conflict. A major organizational step in this direction was taken by member states in 2011 with the establishment of the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (ASEAN-IPR). The institute's remit is to "undertake research and compile ASEAN's experiences and best practices on peace, conflict management and conflict resolution as well as post-conflict peace-building, with the view to providing appropriate recommendations, upon request by ASEAN Member States, to ASEAN Bodies."<sup>54</sup> Though ASEAN-IPR has held a handful of workshops since its inception, it is underutilized and does not serve as an effective information-sharing platform.

**ASEAN should better distribute its external trade and reduce economic dependence on any single trading partner.** Southeast Asian countries have grown increasingly dependent on China for trade, investment, and tourism. This has placed the region in an extremely vulnerable position, given Beijing's inclination to apply economic coercion, including weaponizing trade and tourism. In May 2012, Chinese importers stopped purchasing Philippine bananas and rejected produce-filled containers in Chinese ports after a Philippine warship confronted Chinese fishing vessels in the vicinity of Scarborough Shoal. China's use of economic coercion against South Korea in March 2017 over the installation of the US-designed Terminal High Altitude Area Defense antimissile system was more extreme, resulting in a drastic fall in tourism and the persecution of the Lotte conglomerate's investments in China. China's treatment of South Korea and its undeclared economic embargos of Australia, Japan, and several European countries serve as an effective deterrent to smaller economies in Southeast Asia, which have no illusions

about what will happen to their investments and business interests should they confront Beijing over political differences.

To mitigate this risk and preserve their own sovereignty, ASEAN states should diversify their trade and investment relationships, taking a more concerted approach toward economic integration with other member states. Intra-ASEAN trade is currently quite low, accounting for just 23 percent of ASEAN's total trade in 2018.<sup>55</sup> While it would not diminish China's influence unduly, such a strategy would build resiliency and contribute to the protection of each state's sovereignty and independence.

**ASEAN's informal processes should be retained.** Veteran diplomats bemoan the end of "the good old days" of ASEAN gatherings, with their informal opportunities to get acquainted and build trust. They note that the real value of these events is the opportunity for officials to establish rapport in social settings and to meet on the sidelines and resolve differences before bringing viable solutions to a formal setting. Such informal sessions, diplomats believe, have played a critical role in maintaining peace and stability in the region. Recent ASEAN events have shifted toward greater formality and ceremony, complete with the issuance of anodyne statements, road maps, and declarations, at the expense of informal trust building and problem solving, ASEAN's key value proposition.

ASEAN was established as a trust-building mechanism to facilitate dialogue and cooperation among states in the region. By design, the organization is not constructed to mediate conflicts; rather, its numerous annual meetings and summits have provided opportunities for officials to resolve disagreements without the need for binding legal mechanisms. This approach has allowed it to minimize the occurrence of interstate conflict, with many bilateral disputes resolved behind closed doors.

ASEAN's ability to manage conflict, however, has been constrained by its principles of noninterference and consensus-driven decisions. With future challenges already on its doorstep and affecting member states, the association needs to adapt its structure and culture, with particular scrutiny directed toward the continued relevance and feasibility of the association's consensus-based decision making. The ASEAN Way has served the group well since its founding, but for ASEAN and its member states to thrive in an increasingly complex world defined by US-China rivalry, reform and rejuvenation are needed.

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